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YEAST: A VICTORIAN HERESY

BY STANLEY T. WILLIAMS

"YOUR book," Carlyle wrote Kingsley, "is definable as *crude*; to make the malt sweet the fire should and must be slow; the impression is of a fervid creation, still left half chaotic." Someone else has aptly characterized *Yeast* as "genius in a hurry." Nowhere else has Kingsley poured himself so recklessly over the printed page as in this novel written before his thirtieth birthday. *Yeast* lacks *genus*: it begins like a romance; proceeds as a political tract; and ends like a fairy-tale. But though nearly three-quarters of a century old, it still glows with Kingsley's ardour. The placid Victorian past becomes suddenly alive with fierce religious and social disputes. True, the turbulence of feeling in the book is somewhat disconcerting; and often its falsetto artistry provokes mirth; but its air of burning sincerity convinces. This strange novel is a strategic listening post for the conflicting movements of Victorian thought.

In action *Yeast* is a cross between a Platonic dialogue and a penny dreadful. The ribald little boy at the melodrama screaming for more murders would be content with Kingsley's extravagant and familiar devices. For it must be confessed that the Kingsley who declared himself "nothing if not a priest" loved a horrid tale. Lancelot's first meeting with Argemone recalls the story of the social nincompoop whose wont was to attract the attention of ladies by falling down stairs. Close by Argemone's high-church chapel Lancelot crashes from his horse, and suffers a timely concussion of the brain. In making Argemone nurse Lancelot back to life Kingsley observes almost the first of prehistoric literary traditions. The episode is his hearty version of the sprained-ankle motif.

This is melodrama, but it is Colonel Bracebridge, fox-

hunter and courteous seducer who really sets the lights low and the violins at *pizzicato*. He is guilty of no constructive piece of villainy, but his cleverness precludes his being virtuous. He is born out of his due time by at least a century, for in Fielding he would have been a hero. But in this Victorian company he is merely a soft-hearted radical who sins on claret. Kingsley's description of his death makes him a comic character. Certainly not all Victorians could have taken the following passage seriously. It is concerned with the letter which Bracebridge received immediately before he committed suicide, and which Lancelot read over the dead body of his friend: "'How I loved you once! How I hate you now! But I have my revenge. *Your baby cried twice after it was born!*'" Lancelot tore the letter into a hundred pieces and swallowed them."

The first love passage between Argemone and Lancelot is really a gentle religious controversy. In the first intimacy of love still unconfessed Lancelot ventures to assail those who were fighting for truth at Oxford: "'Oh, Mr. Smith,' she said, 'how can you dare to talk so of a liturgy compiled by the wisest and holiest of all countries and ages! . . . Oh,' she said hopefully, 'that you would but try the church system! How you would find it harmonize and methodize every day, every hour for you! . . . Why not go to our vicar and open up your doubts to him?'"

But brutal Lancelot would not try the vicar, for, as he states in a homily a page long, the vicar was inimical to Schiller, Boehmen, and Carlyle! Yet he is not loth to talk with Argemone of love, and its denial of death. To Argemone's coy contention that the angelic life is single Lancelot demurs: "'How do we know that these angels, as they call them, if they be really persons may not be united in pairs by some marriage bond?' 'That is a very wild view, Mr. Smith, and not sanctioned by the Church,' said Argemone severely."

The lovers become more and more intellectual; in particular, the study of Homer binds them more closely. The crescendo of sentiment reaches its height when Lancelot shows Argemone a drawing of his own, in Tennysonian tone, called *The Triumph of Woman*. Argemone drops a "single tear" over the figure of Woman, followed by a trusting gazelle and a wandering butterfly. "And when she fancied that she traced in those bland aquiline lineaments, and in

the crisp ringlets which floated down to the knees of the figure, some traces of her own likeness, a dream of a new destiny floated before her,—she blushed to her very neck. ‘You do not like it! I have been too bold,’ said Lancelot, fearfully. ‘Oh, no! no! It is so beautiful—so full of deep wisdom! But—but—You may leave it.’” *Yeast* is soaked in this kind of sentiment.

Argemone dies, and the result is a complete cessation of the action. The dialogues between the symbolic characters become longer and more didactic. The heroine and villain have vanished, and Kingsley is at some pains to finish his tale. He is, indeed, ridiculously like the author who got his hero at the bottom of a well and lacked the proper literary hoist. Like Sheridan’s hero, it looks as if Lancelot would have to crawl off the stage on his hands and knees. What to do with Lancelot Smith? It is a problem, but nobody would wish to have Kingsley leave *Yeast* unended. A great unfinished novel may be left the world by Dickens, but not by Kingsley. End it Kingsley had to, and he did. He ended it by the creation of a new character, by the unparalleled Barnakill.

Barnakill is from Asia. His profession is unknown and even at his very first appearance he is occult enough to cause the reader considerable annoyance. As an avocation he affects banking, and his outlook upon finance is, to say the least, cosmic. He is, I think, literature’s first transcendental business man. Barnakill has a knack of being found suddenly in odd places. He utters curious moral axioms; he alludes cryptically to an unheard of past and future; and he is forever displaying a weird omniscience concerning things both trivial and tremendous. But above all, Barnakill astounds and shames by his moral perfection. He bestows a sixpence upon Lancelot for lifting a trunk; thus Lancelot is taught the nobility of labour. Who is he? Not till the very end do we learn. Then Lancelot asks Barnakill about the underlying principle of their proposed ideal commonwealth. What is it to be? And Barnakill replies: “‘Jesus Christ—THE MAN.’”

“He took Lancelot by the hand. A peaceful warmth diffused itself over his limbs; the droning of the organ sounded fainter and more faint; the marble monuments grew dim and distant; and, half unconsciously, he followed like a child through the cathedral door.” It is reasonably

clear that Kingsley ended his novel with an incarnation of the Founder of Christianity.

The action of *Yeast* is certainly extraordinary, but to infer that Kingsley was less interested in action than character would be an error. His indifference to naturalness in his story was not due to greater concern over the thoughts and feelings of his characters. Most of these persons leave us cold except for interest in the beliefs to which they cling with such pious enthusiasm. Never the depth of feeling in the face of the baffling facts of life, as in Thackeray; never the subtle growth of character, as in George Eliot. Each person is a doctrinaire, and Kingsley is interested in the doctrines. Every character is a mouthpiece for its creator, and it may be truly said that from each comes, as Mozley has said, "a roar worthy of that lion, Kingsley."

True, Argemone roars you as gently as the proverbial dove. She is as docile as the pet of Androcles. Yet she makes an excellent target for an enemy of Tractarianism. Argemone is important; it is difficult to see how without her Kingsley could have so harassed Puseyism. Like the writer of the doctoral thesis, Kingsley might almost dedicate his book to "the little woman who made this work possible." Argemone has been swept off her feet by the Oxford Movement. Her reading list is longer than Byron's and decidedly less heterodox. For Argemone is under the influence of *Credo in Newmannum*. "She was somewhat high church in her notions, and used to go up every Wednesday and Friday to the chapel in the hills . . . for an hour's mystic devotion, set off by a little graceful asceticism." A secret correspondence has prepared her for entrance into what Kingsley calls a "quasi-Protestant nunnery." At the last instant Argemone recedes from her decision, for she realizes her love for Lancelot. Kingsley exults in the thought that covert Romanism cannot triumph over a real love of body and spirit. With delight he dwells on the defeat of the "rickety windmill of sham-popery." Through Argemone Kingsley tries to show the sin and futility of ultra-Romanism in the Anglican Church.

Equally definite is the phase of thought elucidated through Argemone's lover, Lancelot Smith. This hero is an amazing blend of muscle and metaphysics, and his mind is a storm-center for the religious doubt of the day. The conventional beacons of faith Lancelot hardly sees. He has,

if such a conquest is possible, mastered German philosophy; and Carlyle is a passion. The orthodox churches he will not tolerate, because of their casuistry and their impatience of the physical needs of men. Lancelot professes to be a splendid and unregenerate animal. He stamps upon the earth and delights to run his race. All the healthy Kingsleyan virtues are his; and he is easily recognizable as a brother to Amyas Leigh, and other characters in less ecclesiastical novels of Kingsley's.

Especially does Lancelot love the dust of combat with what he considers the unmanly aspects of religion. Theology has made the Church a cold abstraction. So he writes dreary letters to Luke, the Tractarian curate, denouncing effeminacy in the Anglican and Catholic Churches. The pale, peaked faces of holy men stir in him depths of fury, and he ascribes the easy conquest of the animal nature to its fundamental absence. At the nadir of Lancelot's unrest Tregarva, the Methodist gamekeeper, shows him the misery of the English agricultural poor. Lancelot's disgust for altars, on which you could not see the Christ for saints, deepens. The true religion, he concludes, must involve increasing care for social betterment. Here, at least, is a man's work; to it Lancelot consecrates his life. The character is obviously a symbol of the spiritual dissatisfaction of England's young men,—and of the ideal remedy! Lancelot is, I believe, the best sketch in literature of Kingsley's "muscular Christian," or of the "Christian Socialist." Note the name of Lancelot Smith, a delightful sample of Kingsley's naïveté in novel construction. Lancelot is a nineteenth century knight-errant, but he is also *Smith*, of the Smiths; of the stock and stem of everyday Englishmen. He is a champion for and of the common people.

We of the next century, the incredible twentieth, think our age the crepuscular time before the birth of a new order. But Kingsley thought this of the nineteenth century. In the preface to the First Edition of *Yeast* he declares that he has tried to express truly popular notions of the social and religious order. Aptly enough the caption of one of Kingsley's poems might be made the title of *Yeast*,—*The Dead Church*. This is a basic idea in the book, whether one thinks of Argemone's pathetic neo-Catholicism or Lancelot's bitter echo from Carlyle: "We have forgotten God."

Always this despair is closely linked with antagonism towards the Catholic Church. Kingsley's is the eternal opposition of the Protestant to the Catholic theory of authority. The security and happiness of Luke, after going to Rome, he cannot endure. Kingsley's whole life was a rough and ready struggle against doubt; therefore what he cannot endure in Catholics is their certainty. The letters to Luke, denouncing Catholicism, have their prototypes in actual letters of Charles Kingsley. Sometimes it seems as if this resentment had its origin in yearning for the faith for which he was temperamentally unfitted. "I have been through it," he says. "I have longed for Rome, and boldly faced the consequences of Rome."

Naturally Kingsley is no less hostile towards the party seeking to deprotestantize the Anglican Church. Weak men such as Luke were likely to find it a half-step to Rome. Thus the vicar who lays siege to Argemone is an unwitting sophist, and is represented as having marked leanings towards the ancient church. But Kingsley's real accusation against the Oxford Movement was that it created new wounds in the Church, when all her might was needed to fight real and sinister enemies within the fold. Lancelot is estopped from embracing Christian Socialism earlier because his brain has been confused by the unintelligible heresies and hair-splitting controversies of the ecclesiastics. Similarly, Argemone's vapid devotions in the woodland chapel disappear in the face of the real issue of helping the wretches in England's countryside. That Kingsley was blundering right in believing that chicanery existed between the neo-Catholics and Rome may not be a defensible position. Certainly Newman saw to it that this attitude ended disastrously for Kingsley. But that the discussion of aesthetic practices, or even of dogma, was trivial compared with the immediate relief of the misery of the poor,—this is tenable ground, and constituted in *Yeast*, as elsewhere, Kingsley's strongest contention against the Oxford Movement.

But the central current of thought in *Yeast* is concerned with Christian Socialism. Tregarva interprets the misery of the country as in *Alton Locke* Sandy Mackay depicts the anguish of the city. In these episodes Lancelot is merely a Socratic questioner, and Tregarva's long responses are like a Kingsleyan social pamphlet. The kinds of oppression are

not wholly familiar, but Kingsley convinces by sheer vehemence and passionate feeling, and the twentieth century reader finds himself connecting by secret conduits the suffering of 1850 and the unrest of 1920. Is the picture too sordid to be truthful? Let there make answer the *Corn Rhymes* of Ebenezer Elliott, the lyrics of Hood, or the *Autobiography of a Chartist*, by Cooper. Although it is easy to smile at England's Jeremiahs, the truth remains that she has been often on the brink of social revolution. And one of these times was the day of the Chartist. *Yeast* is a practical advertisement of the cause of Christian Socialism. Against the troubles described in *Yeast* Frederick Denison Maurice and Charles Kingsley had united as the first Christian Socialists. The mode of battle was the old one of the Puseyites, the tract. The new *Tracts for the Times* were for the workingmen of England, and were called *Politics for the People*. The organization of the Christian Socialists was complex, but their platform was simple: the application of "the practical principles of Christianity to the purposes of trade and industry."

Rossetti, once passing an election meeting, remarked idly: "Well, I suppose someone will get in." The artist-poet turned to what he considered the more enduring interests of art and literature. And I see no reason why a student of the Victorians should examine *Yeast* so precisely, if it were filled merely with religious or political transiencies. But it mirrors, too, the literary tendencies of its time. The stamp of the exemplars of the literature of 1850 is upon the book. Such influences and literary inter-relations have a certain interest even to-day, not only for the red-blooded hunter who spends the summer in the library gunning for sources, but also for the critic of significant nineteenth century prose and poetry. Kingsley was an imitative writer. His great model in poetry was Tennyson; in prose Carlyle. Everywhere in *Yeast* is apparent Kingsley's enormous debt to Carlyle. References to him are *passim* and the very spirit of the book is Carlyle's. If *Alton Locke* was inspired by the *French Revolution*, certainly *Yeast* was directly affected by *Past and Present*. In its abruptness, its eloquence, and its sincerity it is Carlylean.

Yeast's failure to hold its own among literary productions of the fifties is due chiefly to the fact that many of its

problems were accidental and ephemeral. Though the fundamental political and religious questions still torment us, the particular issue of Poor Law Relief is no longer vital. Kingsley, foolishly enough, stressed not the deeper *impasse*, but the topic of the day. Art always avenges itself upon the artist who uses his gift for a temporary end, and Kingsley's *Yeast* pays this penalty. Witch-burning is not now a menace, but men will continue to read *The Scarlet Letter* because it considers the unsolved problems of the human soul, and thus has eternal interest. *Yeast* was always, in the literary sense, justly perishable.

But students of Victorian literature will still read this potpourri. They will be sensible of its anomalies, its fallacies, its roughness, and its forgotten prejudices. They will be amused at this singular combination of Platonic dialogue, tract, sermon, diatribe, and ballad, but they will understand the Victorians better, and so think their reading worth while. "In homely English," Kingsley concludes in his Epilogue, "I have given my readers *Yeast*; if they be what I take them for, they will be able to bake with it themselves."

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